

QUALIFICATION
REFORM: A GUIDE
TO WHAT IS
HAPPENING
AROUND THE UK

UCAS

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CONTENTS

Introduction 3

Qualification reform statements 4

England..... 5

 A levels in England 5

 Science practical..... 6

 AS in England..... 7

 The AS and HE 7

Vocational qualifications at Level 3 8

GCSEs in England..... 9

 English language 10

Northern Ireland 11

 A levels in Northern Ireland 11

 GCSEs in Northern Ireland 12

Wales..... 13

 Welsh Baccalaureate..... 13

 AS and A levels in Wales 14

 GCSEs in Wales..... 16

Scotland..... 18

 National 4 and 5 qualifications and courses with an SCQF Level 4/5 entry requirement (or GCSE equivalent entry requirements) 19

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Introduction

Qualifications in the UK are currently undergoing significant reform. Administrations throughout the UK are reviewing and reforming the range of qualifications offered in schools and colleges, and are also reforming apprenticeship frameworks. Qualifications are also being used more for school accountability and performance measures.

For secondary schools and colleges these changes, and the scheduling of the reforms, will present challenges and opportunities in deciding what range of subjects and qualifications to offer their students. Considerations such as funding, timetabling, and the response of employers and the higher education sector will all play a part and it is evident, in England at least, that some schools and colleges will seek to review their qualification offer once all of the new A level specifications are available in 2017. In turn, changes arising from qualification reform will impact upon the advice given to young people about their choices post-16, and their progression to higher education.

The end of the tri-partite agreement between England, Wales and Northern Ireland means that reforms to GCSEs and A levels will result in structurally different qualifications with the same name in different parts of the UK. Equally, the flexibility offered by the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland and the decoupling of the AS from the A level in England means that secondary schools and colleges are likely to offer increasingly diverse programmes to their students.

Those involved in admissions to higher education at universities and colleges want to understand qualification reforms and the diversity of subject and examination provision right across the UK, so that their admissions policies and processes are fair and transparent for all applicants irrespective of where they are at school or college.

In the next few years it is likely that significant numbers of students will be applying to higher education with new qualifications and new combinations of qualifications. Universities and colleges are already reviewing their entry requirements and offer making approaches to reflect the changes in progress and ensure that applicants are not disadvantaged.

The information within this document is intended to provide a high level overview of what is happening throughout the UK. It covers:

- a summary timetable of qualification reforms across the UK
- statements published by universities and colleges about qualification reform and admissions
- information about qualification reform in each of England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, and how this may impact on progression and admissions to higher education

If you have any questions or would like further information please contact Ben Jordan (Senior Policy Executive – b.jordan@ucas.ac.uk).

Qualification reform statements

A number of universities and colleges have released statements explaining how they will accommodate qualification reform. In England, Northern Ireland and Wales these tend to focus on A level and GCSE changes, whereas in Scotland the statements explain how a particular university or college will accommodate the flexibility that Curriculum for Excellence introduces.

These statements can be found on our website: www.ucas.com/advisers/guides-and-resources/qualification-reform

England

This section outlines changes to:

- A levels
- Science practicals at A level
- AS
- Vocational qualifications at Level 3
- GCSEs

A levels in England

Reformed A levels will be first taught in England from 2015. The introduction of reformed A levels will be phased, meaning that it is likely that learners will be studying both reformed and unreformed A levels at the same time until all subjects have been reformed.

The range of subjects reformed for first teaching in 2015 accounts for the majority of examination entries.

Reformed A levels will be available in the following subjects for first teaching from September 2015:

- Sciences: biology, chemistry, physics
- English: English language, English literature, English language and literature
- Art and design
- Business
- Computer science
- Economics
- History
- Sociology
- Psychology

AS qualifications in these subjects will be first awarded in 2016, with the first revised A levels being awarded in 2017.

Additional reformed subjects will be first taught from 2016 and 2017 in subsequent phases. These subjects are yet to be reformed – they are either in the process of being reformed or under consultation. Ofqual, the qualification regulator for England, will confirm the arrangements for those subjects in due course.

Reformed A levels in England will be two-year linear qualifications with terminal exams, and in some cases, contain non-exam assessment. The content of these qualifications is also being reviewed to make sure it is up-to-date. The amount of change will vary across subjects.

Further information regarding the content for each reformed A level can be found here: www.gov.uk/government/collections/gce-as-and-a-level-subject-content.

Further information about the development of the content for A levels in mathematics, ancient languages, modern foreign languages and geography can be found here: <http://alcab.org.uk/>

Ofqual has confirmed that the standard of the reformed A level will remain the same as the current A level. The grading scale will remain as it currently is.

Science practical

From 2015, revised science A levels in England (biology, chemistry and physics) will include a separate result for the practical element of the qualification.

At present, up to 30% of the overall A level grade is derived from assessment of the candidate's practical skills.

Practical work in the new science A levels will be assessed in two ways. First, 15% of the marks in the written exams will assess learners' understanding of practical work. Learners' performance here will contribute to their subject grade. Second, learners will have their practical skills assessed separately. They will receive an additional pass or fail result for this which will be recorded on their qualification certificate

Each learner will carry out a minimum of 12 practical activities over their two-year course of study. These activities will be referenced in the final written exams and will contribute to their separate practical result, although evidence of competency in the practical skills is not limited to these activities.

UCAS will ask the school or college of an applicant entering science A levels in Apply to indicate whether they are predicted to pass the science practical assessment in the same way as the main A level exams.

Individual universities and colleges will have their own policies in relation to the science practical result and the requirement for it is likely to vary. However, it is likely that they will ask for a pass in the science practical for courses that involve laboratory and practical work from the outset, such as STEM courses. Where this is the case, they will make it clear in their entry requirements.

AS in England

The AS qualification will be decoupled from the reformed A level. This means that achievement in the AS will no longer count towards the final mark of the full A level. The final A level mark will be based solely on the final assessment (including the contribution of any non-exam assessment where relevant).

Learners will still be able to sit an AS qualification as part of their overall A level programme if it is offered by their school or college, but the mark for this will not count towards the overall grade achieved in the final A level. The AS result will be separately awarded and certificated.

Awarding organisations have sought to develop AS qualifications that can be co-taught alongside the corresponding A level.

Although the AS will no longer count towards the final A level grade, it is still likely to have value for progression to higher education for the following reasons:

- It allows for additional breadth of study.
- It provides externally validated information as part of an applicant's application form.
- It provides a useful milestone of progress.
- It can potentially provide a motivational stepping-stone for some students.

Ofqual has confirmed that the AS will remain at the same standard as the current AS and the same grade scale will be used as now.

The AS and HE

The decoupling of the AS in England has led to a number of schools and colleges asking how the AS is used in admission to higher education.

Universities and colleges are autonomous in the way they value qualifications and practices vary. The AS is used in the following ways:

- As part of their holistic assessment of an applicant.
- As an external validation of predicted grades.
- Only if an applicant has not met the terms of their offer.
- If they require a fourth AS as part of their standard entry requirements.

Even if an admissions department does not use the AS in their admissions processes, the AS will still provide useful information about the learner and may indicate breadth of study.

Many universities and colleges have made statements regarding their use of the AS qualification as part of the admissions process. These can be found here:

www.ucas.com/advisers/guides-and-resources/qualification-reform

Vocational qualifications at Level 3

Some vocational qualifications offered at Level 3 have been reformed as a result of changes to school performance tables. Vocational qualifications must meet the criteria set by the Department for Education (DfE) in order to count towards school performance tables. These reforms mean that 91% of the Level 3 qualifications that previously counted towards school performance tables will be removed from performance tables in 2016.

For accountability purposes, vocational qualifications will now be classified as:

- **Applied General qualifications:** The purpose of these qualifications is to provide a broader vocational education. They ‘are designed for students wanting to continue their education through applied learning.’

These qualification must meet a number of criteria, including endorsement by at least three universities and colleges.

- **Tech Level qualifications:** The purpose of these qualifications is to lead to a ‘recognised occupation’. Examples provided by the DfE include engineering, accounting, construction, manufacturing, agriculture and IT.

These qualifications must meet a number of criteria, including the endorsement of five employers registered at Companies House.

Further information about the qualifications that are categorised as above can be found here:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/vocational-qualifications-for-14-to-19-year-olds

The reform to vocational qualifications is being conducted in two stages: an interim stage and full stage. Each of these stages will introduce new criteria for vocational qualifications to meet in order to count towards school performance tables.

The first teaching of the qualifications reformed on an interim basis will be from 2014 and these will count towards school performance tables in 2016. Only qualifications that meet the full criteria will count towards performance tables from 2018.

Fully reformed vocational qualifications will have to display a number of characteristics, including:

- **Purpose Statement:** A Purpose Statement for an Applied General qualification must explicitly state that the qualification supports progression to a range of subjects at a higher level of learning.
- **Size:** Applied General qualifications must require at least 150 guided learning hours (GLH). Tech Level qualifications must require at least 300 GLH.
- **Appropriate content:** A qualification specification must state the specific content that students must pass to achieve the qualification. Mandatory content and the associated contribution to the overall grade must make up at least:

- 40% of a Tech Level
- 60% of an Applied General
- **Appropriate assessment:** Tech Levels must have 30% external assessment. Applied General must have at least 40% external assessment. Students will also be given one opportunity to resit.
- **Synoptic** assessment.
- **Grading:** All vocational qualifications must be graded using three grading points or more, such as Distinction/Merit/Pass.

Within the first two years of a qualification being awarded, a qualification must also show:

- **Progression:** For Applied General a qualification must show that it allows students to go on to study at a higher level. Similarly, it must be shown that learners with Tech Levels go on to employment.
- **Track record:** Vocational qualifications need to be achieved by at least 100 students aged 16-19, in at least three centres, in one of the first two years following approval for recognition in performance tables.

Further information regarding the criteria that vocational qualifications must meet in order to count towards school performance tables in 2017 and 2018 can be found here:

[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/320472/16_to_19_qualifications - 2017 and 2018 performance tables.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/320472/16_to_19_qualifications_-_2017_and_2018_performance_tables.pdf)

GCSEs in England

GCSEs in England will begin to change fundamentally from 2015, with new specifications being taught in English language, English literature and mathematics from September.

Revised GCSEs will be taught in the following subjects from September 2016:

- Art and design
- Biology
- Chemistry
- Citizenship
- Computer science
- Food preparation and nutrition
- Dance
- Double award combined science

- Drama
- Geography
- History
- Modern foreign languages and ancient languages
- Music
- Physical education
- Physics
- Religious studies.

Further subjects will be revised for 2017 first teaching.

Key features of the new GCSEs

- New GCSEs will be graded 9-1, with 9 being the highest grade. A U grade will be awarded for those who fail to meet the requirements for the award of a 1.
- The qualification will be predominantly exam-based. However, other forms of assessment will be used for essential subject-specific assessment that can't be assessed by written exam, such as speaking skills in English language.
- Tiering (the practice of having different examinations or assessments for different ability groups) will only be used when one set of assessments cannot assess students across the full ability range in a valid and manageable way, or where there are content requirements specific to the higher tier only.

The new grading introduces differing grade standards across GCSEs in England. No comparison can be made between the current alphabetical grading scale and the revised numerical one. However, it is expected that the same proportion of candidates will achieve a 4 and above as achieve a C and above in the current system.

English language

In the reformed English language specification, spoken language skills will be assessed and reported separately. Students will also receive a separate result for this. UCAS Apply will allow students to indicate this in their application.

Further information about the changes to GCSEs in England can be found here:

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/375888/2014-04-08-an-update-on-the-reforms-being-made-to-gcse.pdf

Northern Ireland

This section covers:

- A levels in Northern Ireland
- GCSEs in Northern Ireland

The Minister of Education asked CCEA Regulation as the regulator of qualifications in Northern Ireland to undertake a fundamental review of GCSEs and A levels. The subsequent report was submitted in 2013 and the Minister accepted its recommendations in March 2014. He also announced that Northern Ireland would continue to have an open market for GCSE and A level qualifications, meaning that all awarding organisations currently offering these qualifications will continue to be able to do so in the future.

CCEA Regulation will work closely with the Department of Education (NI), awarding organisations and other regulators to maintain the rigour and comparability of all qualifications offered in Northern Ireland.

A levels in Northern Ireland

A levels delivered by CCEA Awarding Organisation

Revised A levels delivered by CCEA Awarding Organisation (AO) will be first taught from September 2016 and the changes will focus largely on the content of the qualification.

The subjects being revised by CCEA AO for first teaching in 2016 are:

- Applied business
- Art and design
- Biology
- Business studies
- Chemistry
- Economics
- English literature
- Environmental technology
- Food and nutrition
- Geography
- Government and politics
- Health and social care
- History

- History of art
- ICT
- Journalism
- Modern languages
- Moving image arts
- Music
- Performing arts
- Physics
- Religious studies
- Software systems development
- Sports science and the active leisure industry
- Technology and design.

In Northern Ireland, the AS will remain part of the A level, with AS results contributing to the overall A level grade. Equally, marks for science practical skills will continue to form part of the overall grade for science A levels.

In Northern Ireland, the weighting of the AS will change, with revised AS qualifications making a 40% contribution to the overall A level grade.

Schools will be able to decide whether they offer these qualifications in a modular or linear fashion, recognising that schools take these decisions with their students' best interests in mind.

In 2014, CCEA AO had around 75% of the overall market share of A levels in Northern Ireland.

A levels delivered by other awarding organisations

Learners in Northern Ireland will be able to undertake A level qualifications offered by AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC from 2015. These will follow the same structure as those offered in England and Wales, although all science A levels taken in Northern Ireland must have marks for the practical assessment contributing to the overall grade.

GCSEs in Northern Ireland

Revised GCSEs will be first taught from September 2017 and the changes to these qualifications will focus largely on content.

Further information will be provided once it is made available by CCEA AO.

Wales

This section outlines changes to:

- Welsh Baccalaureate
- AS and A levels in Wales
- GCSEs in Wales

Welsh Baccalaureate

The current Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma is an overarching qualification that is made up of the Welsh Baccalaureate Core (Level 3) and other supporting qualifications, such as a minimum of two A levels (A*-E) or equivalent.

However, the model is changing and over the next few years three variations of the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Level may be seen in applications from learners in Wales:

- **Pass/fail model:** Summer 2014 was the final major awarding of the Welsh Baccalaureate with a pass/fail grading system. However, applicants are still applying to higher education holding this qualification.
- **Graded model (A*-C):** One of the initial recommendations of the independent [Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19-year olds in Wales](#) was that the current Welsh Baccalaureate should be graded, therefore 2015 (2013 first teaching) will see the first awarding of the graded Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Level. The qualification will be grade A*-C.
- **Revised model (A*-E):** The final report of the Review of Qualifications for 14 to 19 year olds in Wales recommended that a fully reformed, more rigorous Welsh Baccalaureate should be developed for first teaching in 2015 (first award 2017). This will be graded A*E at Advanced Level.

Having more than one Welsh Baccalaureate within UCAS Apply has the potential to cause confusion for applicants and admissions teams. UCAS has sought to reduce confusion for applicants by making it easy for them to identify which version of the qualification they have undertaken. The versions of the Welsh Baccalaureate currently contained in Apply are:

- Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma (pre-2014)
- Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma (graded A* - C).

UCAS will add the further reformed Welsh Baccalaureate to Apply ahead of the 2017 admissions cycle.

The new Advanced Welsh Baccalaureate (first teaching 2015)

The new Advanced Welsh Baccalaureate will seek to develop a number of different skills such as literacy, numeracy, personal effectiveness, critical thinking and problem solving through the completion of three challenges and an Individual Project, which together comprise the **Skills Challenge Certificate**:

- **Individual Project:** This is an independent, research-based assignment on an individually selected subject. Learners demonstrate the knowledge and skills to produce a written investigation, or an artefact or product supported by written research.
- **Enterprise and Employability Challenge:** To develop enterprising skills and attributes and enhance employability.
- **Global Citizenship Challenge:** To understand and respond appropriately to a global issue.
- **Community Challenge:** For learners to identify, develop and participate in opportunities that will benefit the community.

Learners will still need to achieve supporting qualifications, such as A levels and other Level 3 qualifications, in order to achieve the overall Baccalaureate. In addition to this they will also have to achieve GCSE Mathematics-Numeracy and English or Welsh language at grades A* -C.

Further details regarding the qualification can be found here: <http://qualifiedforlife.org.uk/>

AS and A levels in Wales

Revised AS and A levels will be taught from September 2015 in the following subjects:

- Art and design
- Biology
- Business
- Chemistry
- Computer science
- Economics
- English language
- English language and literature
- English literature
- History
- Physics
- Psychology

- Sociology
- Welsh (first language)

Revised AS and A levels in the following subjects will be taught from September 2016:

- Drama
- French
- Geography
- German
- Music
- Physical education
- Religious studies
- Spanish
- Welsh second language

Further subjects will be revised in 2017. These will include mathematics, further mathematics and design and technology. These were planned for implementation from September 2016, but have now been deferred to 2017 (as is the case in England).

The changes to these qualifications are largely around content, with these subjects sharing similar content with their English equivalent where possible. However, differences may exist when there is a need to reflect a Welsh perspective.

A levels offered in Wales will continue to have an embedded AS qualification. However, the weighting of the AS in reformed A levels will be reduced to 40%, meaning that a learner's achievement in the second year of A level study will make up a greater proportion of their overall grade.

Practical or controlled assessment will be retained in subjects where it plays an important role in assessing the subject and will continue to contribute towards the final grade.

The Welsh government is withdrawing the following AS and A level qualifications in Wales:

- AS and A level in applied art and design
- AS and A level in applied business
- AS and A level in human biology
- AS and A level in economics and business (combined course)

These qualifications will be awarded for the final time in summer 2017 on a limited basis.

GCSEs in Wales

GCSEs in Wales will remain the main Level 1 and Level 2 qualification undertaken by young people and will retain the current A*-G grading scale.

New GCSEs in Wales will be first taught from September 2015 in the following subjects:

- English language
- Welsh language
- Mathematics – numeracy
- Mathematics.

Revised specifications will be taught in the following subjects:

- English literature
- Welsh literature.

The new GCSEs in English language and Welsh language will provide a greater focus on literacy and the functional aspects of language. In both GCSEs, oracy, reading and writing skills will contribute to the overall grade. The achievement in these individual aspects will be reported on certificates.

It is expected that most young people in Wales will study both mathematics GCSE qualifications.

New GCSEs in Wales will be first taught from September 2016 in the following subjects:

- Art and design
- Biology
- Chemistry
- Drama
- French
- Geography
- German
- History
- Music
- Physical education
- Physics
- Religious studies
- Spanish.

In addition to revising the GCSEs in biology, chemistry and physics, the whole of the GCSE science suite is being reviewed. This will ensure that there is a relevant and coherent suite of science GCSEs available to learners in Wales.

Further subjects will be announced in 2017. This will include design and technology, which was planned for implementation from September 2016, but has now been deferred to 2017 – as is the case in England.

The Welsh Government is withdrawing GCSE Digital Communication in Wales. It will be awarded for the final time in summer 2017. These qualifications will be offered on a limited basis until that point.

Scotland

This section provides information about:

- Curriculum for Excellence
- Changes to National 4 and 5 qualifications
- Highers and Advanced Highers
- National 4 and 5 qualifications and courses with an SCQF Level 4/5 entry requirement (or GCSE equivalent entry requirements)

In recent years, the education system in Scotland has undergone major reform as part of Curriculum for Excellence. This has transformed teaching practice and the curriculum offered to young people aged 3-19.

All qualifications revised as part of Curriculum for Excellence aim to develop the following four capacities, enabling young people to become:

- successful learners
- confident individuals
- responsible citizens
- effective contributors

Further information about the four capacities can be found here:

www.educationscotland.gov.uk/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/thepurposeofthecurriculum/index.asp

Curriculum for Excellence introduces a range of new qualifications in Scotland. For example, Standard Grades have been replaced and Intermediate 1 and 2 qualifications are being phased out by the end of 2014/15. These qualifications are being replaced by National 4 and 5 qualifications, which were first introduced in 2013/14. Some of the first learners holding National 4 and 5 qualifications will enter higher education in 2015.

National 4 qualifications are different to the courses previously offered at SCQF Level 4. Previously learners would start their Standard Grades in S3 (third year of secondary school) and study them over two years. Learners generally begin studying new Nationals at the start of S4 (fourth year of secondary school), following a broader general education at S1, S2 and S3. National 4 learners are assessed throughout the year internally using SQA assessments and there are no externally assessed exams.

National 5 qualifications will contain external assessment and be of the same standard as qualifications previously offered at SCQF Level 5, such as Standard Grade Credit and Intermediate 2.

August 2014 saw new Highers taught in Scotland which reflect the aims and principles of Curriculum for Excellence. SQA has confirmed that these are the same standard as previous

Highers. Applicants will begin to apply to higher education holding these qualifications from the 2015 admissions cycle.

New and existing Highers are being dual run for the 2014/15 academic year. Due to the phased introduction of new Highers across Scotland, some applicants that apply for 2015 entry holding Highers may have studied the unrevised version, or a combination of both versions.

The new Advanced Highers will be first taught in August 2015, meaning that Scottish applicants applying to higher education for 2016 entry may be in possession of these qualifications. SQA has confirmed that both the new and existing Advanced Highers are at an identical standard.

One of the main objectives of Curriculum for Excellence is to introduce curriculums that are tailored for the individual learner. What this means is that there is an increased flexibility in the delivery of qualifications and we will see greater diversity in the way qualifications are taken. For example, while a learner is undertaking the National 4 or 5 syllabus in S4, they may not undertake the actual qualifications and summative assessment, allowing them to move directly to their Highers at some stage in S4. Equally, some applicants may take a mix of National 4 and 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers in a single year.

All 19 universities and colleges in Scotland have published statements on their website detailing their policy in relation to the flexibility Curriculum for Excellence brings. SQA is currently engaging with universities and colleges in other parts of the UK to similarly encourage the publication of such statements. These can be found on our website: www.ucas.com/advisers/guides-and-resources/qualification-reform

National 4 and 5 qualifications and courses with an SCQF Level 4/5 entry requirement (or GCSE equivalent entry requirements)

Curriculum for Excellence introduces new flexibility to the way qualifications are taken by Scottish students, with students being able to bypass National 4 and 5 in favour of studying their Highers.

Some courses, such as medicine and dentistry, often stipulate that a candidate must have a GCSE equivalent entry requirement, such as a National 5 qualification in English. In the event that an applicant has bypassed their National 4 and 5 qualifications, the university or college will normally require that the qualifications are achieved at Higher or Advanced Higher.

For example:

Medicine (A100)

Higher: AAABB

National 5: A in mathematics and English

If you have not studied National 5 qualifications, we would expect you to have studied English and mathematics at Higher.

All Scottish and some English universities and colleges have published a Curriculum for Excellence statement (available to view on their individual websites) that describes how they will accommodate the differing patterns of provision.

Universities and colleges will implement selection criteria and processes that will ensure that applicants are not disadvantaged due to the pattern of provision undertaken.

UCAS advises all applicants who have a query regarding the entry requirements for a specific course to contact the university or college concerned for clarification.